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DEPT FOR AF/E AND A/S FRAZER

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SUBJECT: Somali TFG Arms Sweep Begins--Heavy Fighting

¶1. (U) Multiple sources report that heavy fighting between TFG forces and insurgents began in Mogadishu around 0600 this morning, March 21. Press reporting indicated that Ethiopian troops and tanks were supporting TFG troops; but by mid-afternoon, contacts in Mogadishu were reporting that the Ethiopian forces were less visible on the streets. Fighting was concentrated in two neighborhoods: Shirkole near the Ethiopian HQ at the former Ministry of Defense and across town in the vicinity of the Hotel Ramadan; but there are reports of more widespread shelling in the city and of large fires in Bakara Market. Sporadic fighting continues.

¶2. (U) As of 1400 local, sources in Mogadishu were reporting up to 60 dead and 60 wounded. An Ethiopian political official admitted to 34 Ethiopian casualties in the day's fighting. Insurgents claimed to have captured up to 12 TFG soldiers. Press and Mogadishu contacts report that the bodies of between two and five dead TFG and/or Ethiopian soldiers (they were the same uniform) were dragged through the streets and set afire. Pictures are being posted on several Somali news websites, as well as on Al Jazeera.

¶3. (U) According to local sources in Mogadishu, TFG forces initially seemed to have the upper hand, but insurgents were seen to be gaining by mid-afternoon. These sources reported that the TFG had not made any statements about the day's events, leaving the residents to wonder whether the insurgents might actually have defeated government forces.

¶4. (SBU) Comment. The Somali Ambassador to Kenya stated at a press conference today in Nairobi that this battle was the beginning of the long-expected effort by the TFG to confiscate civilian arms in Mogadishu. Numerous sources were indicating that this planned operation was engendering wide-spread popular anger in the city toward the TFG. Whether or not the TFG is ultimately successful in this endeavor, popular resentment could make it difficult to hold a meaningful National Reconciliation Conference as scheduled in mid-April.

¶5. (SBU) Comment continued. The reported absence of Ethiopian combat support for TFG forces will make it difficult for the government's mostly inexperienced troops to make headway against a determined resistance from insurgent militia.

Ranneberger